

Wounded Healing: Forming a Storytelling Community in Hip-Hop Lit

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Background/Context: *Over the past 5 years, there has been a growing body of scholarship that examines the intersections of hip-hop culture and classroom pedagogy. Although recent scholarship has persuasively demonstrated the classroom potential of hip-hop texts for promoting student engagement, scaffolding sanctioned forms of knowledge, and nurturing critical consciousness and activism, little work has been done to unpack the complex relations of power that emerge in such classrooms. In particular, we know very little about the ways in which students and teachers are (re)positioned within classrooms that engage in hip-hop-centered pedagogy. This article contributes to the current literature in hip-hop based education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and critical pedagogy by examining the some of the issues and tensions that emerge when teachers engage in hip-hop-centered classroom pedagogy.*

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: *This study details how the articulation of personal narratives within Hip-Hop Lit, a hip-hop-centered high school English literature course, produced a practice of “wounded healing,” in which people bearing the scars of suffering shared their stories in ways that provided a form of release and relief for themselves and others. This article highlights the complex relationships that students forged with the course’s hip-hop texts, many of which resonated with their own lived experiences. I then illustrate how these relationships enabled the classroom discussions and interactions from which the practices of wounded healing emerged. Finally, I highlight some of the dilemmas and tensions that emerged as my coteacher and I attempted to privilege the stories and experiences of our students and ourselves within the classroom.*

Setting: *Data for this study were collected at “Howard High School,” a small comprehensive urban high school in the northeastern United States.*

Research Design: *Data for this 1-year ethnography were collected using field notes, formal and informal interviews, document analysis, and video data.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *This article shows how Hip-Hop Lit operated as a space in which members offered and responded to various types of individual and group narratives*

through the practice of “wounded healing.” Through this practice, students were able to recognize the commonality of their experiences, challenge various ideologies, and produce new knowledge. In doing this, the members of the class forged a cohesive community replete with multiple roles and relations of power. This article points to the need for critically interrogating the ostensible virtues of hip-hop-based education, as well as critical and culturally relevant pedagogies more broadly. This article also underscores the need for more ethnographic research that unpacks the complexities, contours, and contradictions of curricula, and pedagogy that responds to the lived experiences of students.

In Greek mythology, Chiron, half-man and half-horse, was an extraordinary physician, teacher, and healer. One day, he was accidentally hit in the knee with an arrow from Hercules. Because the arrow was coated with the blood of Hydra, Chiron was unable to heal the wound that it opened. As an immortal, he could not die and was therefore forced to bear the pain of the wound while continuing the practice of healing. From that point forward, he became known as the “wounded healer.”

Drawing from ethnographic data, this article details how the articulation of personal narratives within Hip-Hop Lit, a hip-hop-centered English literature course that I cotaught in an alternative evening education program at an urban high school, produced a similar practice of “wounded healing.” Within this space, people bearing the scars of suffering shared their stories in ways that provided a form of release and relief for themselves and others. By *wounded healing*, I refer not only to the therapeutic dimensions of personal and collective storytelling but also to a critical engagement with majoritarian narratives that exposes and produces new possibilities for culturally relevant classroom practice. Through wounded healing, students formed a storytelling community in which membership was predicated upon individuals’ ability and willingness to “expose their wounds” (share their stories) to the rest of the group.

In this article, I begin to explicate the complex relationships that students forged with the course’s hip-hop texts, many of which resonated with the students’ lived experiences. I then illustrate how these relationships enabled classroom discussions and interactions from which the practices of wounded healing emerged. Finally, I highlight some of the dilemmas and tensions that emerged as my coteacher and I attempted to privilege the stories and experiences of our students and ourselves within the classroom. Rather than merely reiterating one of the many “victory narratives” (Lather, 1993) that often accompany accounts of culturally responsive, hip-hop-based, and critical pedagogical interventions, this article aims to complicate the insights gained from all three fields by

spotlighting the benefits, consequences, and contradictions of curricula and pedagogies that attempt to engage the lived experiences of students.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

This research is grounded in the relevant research, theory, and practice literature within the fields of critical pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, and “hip-hop-based education.”

Since the field’s “turn to cultural studies” (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992), critical pedagogy scholars have paid considerable attention to the relationship between the everyday cultural practices of students and the cultural politics of schooling. In particular, they have argued that understanding students’ lived experience and sources of pleasure is an essential part of critical pedagogy’s larger project of making the official curriculum more responsive to the everyday lives of students (Giroux & Aronowitz, 1991; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Kellner, 1995). Critical pedagogues have also argued that the inclusion of popular culture within the official school curriculum allows for a more democratic space because it validates the personal histories, experiences, and values of students (Giroux, 1996, 1992). Despite its expressed commitment to reconfiguring existing curriculum and pedagogy to account for the ways that popular culture reflects and constitutes youth identities and experiences, empirical work within critical pedagogy literature remains largely textual. As a consequence, rich ethnographic investigations into the relationships between youth and popular culture have been underrepresented in comparison with rigid textual analyses of popular music, television, and film (Daspit & Weaver, 2001; Dimitriadis, 2001; Vasudevan & Hill, 2008). Although these analyses are indispensable for spotlighting the overt and latent ideological structures within popular texts, as well as the pedagogical role that popular culture texts play in the lives of youth (Giroux, 2003), their nearly exclusive focus on ideological critique obscures the complex and often unpredictable connections that young people forge with popular texts (Dimitriadis). With regard to hip-hop culture, this largely textualist posture has resulted in studies that interrogate hip-hop culture along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and political economy (e.g., hooks, 1994; McLaren, 1999; Rose, 1994) in ways that tacitly or explicitly privilege text over context and production over reception. Thus, this study contributes to the critical pedagogy literature by ethnographically examining the relationships between youth and hip-hop culture within the classroom context.

This study also complements the important scholarship that has been produced within the field of “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-

Billings, 1994). Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing body of research that demonstrates the importance of appealing to the experiences, cultural orientations, values, and worldviews of students in order to effectuate greater educational outcomes. Of particular significance is the work of Lee (1993, 1995a, 1995b), whose cultural modeling framework advocates the design of “instruction that makes explicit connections between students’ everyday knowledge and the demands of subject-matter learning” (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003, p. 7). Using this framework, Lee investigated the effectiveness of signifying as a scaffold for teaching and learning literary interpretation.¹ Drawing on prior research that asserted that African American students tend to perform better in small, cooperative learning groups (Boykin, 1986; Slavin, 1990; Slavin & Oickle, 1981), Lee’s experimental group received small-group instruction and used culturally relevant vernacular texts as the primary literary source by which to teach literary interpretive skills. The experimental group showed statistically significant gains in literal and inferential reading categories. In addition to Lee’s quantitative work, many qualitative studies (e.g., Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Leonard & Hill, 2008) have demonstrated how culturally relevant classroom interventions positively contribute to student confidence, curricular engagement, and teacher-student relationships. Although this literature substantiates the effectiveness of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy with regard to quantifiable outcomes and classroom environment, there remains a dearth of scholarship that examines issues of classroom power and positionality in response to culturally relevant pedagogy. Specifically, we must begin to interrogate how the reorganization of official knowledge, classroom expertise, and sanctioned culture affects student and teacher identities within the classroom space. This study offers insight into this phenomenon by considering the unique roles, practices, and identities that emerged within the Hip-Hop Lit community.

Building on research and theory from critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy scholarship, a growing number of researchers and practitioners have engaged in what I refer to as “hip-hop-based education” (HHBE). Through their research and practice, HHBE scholars, particularly in the fields of literacy and English education, have effectively shown that hip-hop texts serve as fecund sites for transmitting disciplinary knowledge and sustaining student interest. Although there remains a need for more quantitative research with regard to improved outcomes, many researchers and practitioners have persuasively demonstrated the classroom potential of hip-hop texts for promoting student engagement (Hill, 2006a; Mahiri, 1998; Stovall, 2006), scaffolding

sanctioned forms of knowledge (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Rice, 2003), and nurturing critical consciousness and activism (Dimitriadis, 2001; Pardue, 2004; Stovall). Despite the importance of these insights, HHBE scholarship has yet to unpack the complex relations of power and identity that emerge within HHBE classrooms. In particular, with the exception of Dimitriadis, whose hip-hop-centered intervention was situated within a community center, HHBE research has paid insufficient attention to the relationship between hip-hop-centered pedagogy and the reconstitution of the instructional context. In particular, HHBE scholars must begin to respond to the following questions: How are teachers and students repositioned within the classroom when hip-hop texts become official forms of knowledge? What types of relationships do students forge with hip-hop texts within the classroom context? What types of student and teacher identities are negotiated within HHBE contexts? Based on these and other questions, this article focuses less on the curriculum content or scaffolding practices of HHBE—both of which are detailed elsewhere (Hill, 2006a; Hill, 2008; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002)—and more on the concomitant sociocultural processes that functioned within the course.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

THE SCHOOL

The Hip-Hop Lit course was taught at “Howard High School” (HHS), a small comprehensive urban high school located in Philadelphia. The school has a student population of 1,200 with a 72% attendance rate. Like the neighborhood itself, HHS is racially diverse and predominately Black.² Most of the students in the school qualify for free or reduced lunch, a standard measure of student poverty levels. Originally a junior high school, HHS is quite small in comparison with most city high schools and attracts students from all over the city who want an alternative to the larger neighborhood high schools but are unable to meet the academic requirements of the city’s magnet schools. Nevertheless, the majority of families in the immediate vicinity, most of whom are White, send their children to area parochial schools. Prior to entering graduate school, I was employed at HHS as a Spanish teacher.

The Howard High School Twilight Program (HHSTP) is an evening education program funded by the local school district. Although the program was initially designed for students over the age of 18 to return to school and complete the requirements for a high school diploma, HHSTP has become a catchall for students who do not fit comfortably

within the day school environment. Teen parents, day school “behavior problems,” students whose financial burdens force them to work during the day, students with excessive lateness, and those seeking refuge from school violence are the primary populations who enroll in the program. Students in the program range in age from 15 to 23, with the average student in the program being 17 years old. The program offers opportunities for students to complete their high school education by obtaining credits in Spanish, English, math, science, and social studies, as well as elective courses.

THE COURSE

Hip-Hop Lit course was a yearlong English elective course that was developed as part of a larger research project that examined the effectiveness of using hip-hop texts, particularly printed rap music texts, as primary sources to teach literary interpretation. The Hip-Hop Lit project began as part of an assignment for a graduate school seminar in the spring of 2002. For the project, a preservice teacher and I brought in rap songs once a week and asked students to engage in various forms of interpretation and discussion. The success of the project prompted me to propose a yearlong English elective course that used printed rap texts to teach formal literary interpretive skills. In January 2003, I approached the director of the Twilight Program about teaching the class and conducting a 1-year study. Although he quickly agreed to support the project, he reminded me that union regulations prevented me from legally teaching a course within the School District of Philadelphia without applying for a job and competing against other applicants. As a compromise, Mr. Ormond, the Twilight director, agreed to let me coteach the course with an English teacher from the school who would serve as the official teacher of record.

After an extensive search, I decided to work with Mr. Colombo, a former day school colleague who was also teaching in the Twilight Program. Despite his lack of familiarity with hip-hop culture, he brought an interesting background that contrasted with mine. Mr. Colombo was a 30-year-old White classroom teacher with 4 years of English teaching experience. Although he had little knowledge of or interest in hip-hop culture, he expressed an interest in “learning more about what the students are into.” In contrast, I was a 24-year-old African American doctoral student and a former Spanish teacher at HHS, where I still taught summer school. Unlike Mr. Colombo, I was an active participant in the hip-hop community as a journalist, scholar, and lifelong listener of rap music.

Offered as a 1-year elective course, Hip-Hop Lit was divided into six

thematic units: Love, Roots of Hip-Hop and Literature, Family, Neighborhoods, Politics, and Despair. After several weeks of compiling and deliberating, Mr. Colombo and I decided to use the following texts as the primary sources for Hip-Hop Lit:

Roots of Hip-Hop & Literature	Love	Family	The Hood	Politics	Despair
"The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five	"Manifest" (Third Verse) by Fugees	"Ms. Jackson" by Outkast	"Project Window" by Nas	"I Can" by Nas	"Suicidal Thoughts" by Notorious B.I.G.
"I Used to Love H.E.R." by Common	"Between Me You and Liberation" by Common	"Dear Mama" by Tupac	"Ballad for a Fallen Soldier" by Jay-Z	"The Experience" by Goodie M.O.B.	"Dynasty Intro" by Jay-Z
"Love of My Life" by Erykah Badu and Common	"Ms. Fat Booty" by Mos Def	"Where Have You Been" by Jay-Z and Beanie Sigel	"Summertime" by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince	"I Wanna Talk to You" by Nas	"I Refuse Limitations" by Goodie M.O.B.
"Rapper's Delight" by Sugar Hill Gang	"The Light" by Common	"Retrospect for Life" by Common	"Things Done Changed" by Notorious B.I.G.	"Fuck the Police" by NWA	"Tennessee" by Arrested Development
"Love is Blind" by Eve	"La Femme Fatal" by Digable Planets	"Year of the Dragon" by Wyclef & Lauryn Hill	"They Schools" by dead prez		

In addition to engaging students in close readings of the texts to develop their interpretive skills, we also wanted them to focus on the following key literary terms within each unit:

Roots of Hip-Hop & Literature	Love	Family	The Hood	Politics	Despair
Allusion Signifyin(g) Metaphor Plot	Point of View Simile Hyperbole Theme	Mood Tone Imagery Analogy	Rhyme Scheme Internal Rhyme Personification Foreshadowing	Assonance Consonance Alliteration Hyperbole	Allegory Irony

One of the central features of Hip-Hop Lit was journal writing. For the first 10 minutes of each class, the students would write responses to a question that linked the day's topic to their own ideas and experiences.

Whereas some of the questions were fairly general (e.g., “What is love?” “What would be a good metaphor for your neighborhood?”), others, like the topics themselves, were extremely personal in nature (e.g., “Have you or anyone you know been involved in an abusive relationship?”). During the journaling period, Mr. Colombo and I also responded to the question in our own journals.

After the writing period ended, we asked the students to share their responses with the rest of the class. To begin the sharing portion, we asked a student to volunteer to read his or her journal entry. After the first response, we would ask each student in the circle to read his or her entry or, with more sensitive topics, request more volunteers. Under both circumstances, most of the students in the class offered some form of response to the question, even those who had written little or nothing in their journals. Mr. Colombo and I always shared our responses and frequently volunteered to offer ours first if the students were reluctant to speak.

After receiving a new text, the students would be given a few minutes to engage in sustained silent reading. Afterward, we would read the text out loud as a group. This was done because several of the students were not functional readers, and I was not always confident that they would comprehend the entire text alone. Also, because we almost never listened to music in the course, group reading enabled the students to hear the lyrical complexity of many of the texts.

I would normally initiate group reading by reading the first few lines of the text and waiting for another member of the class to read the subsequent line. Because the process was entirely voluntary and unscripted, there were frequent moments when several students attempted to read a line simultaneously, and other moments when no one was willing to read a line and Mr. Colombo or I had to read the majority of the text. Nevertheless, we continued to introduce texts in this way to provide less skilled readers with the opportunity to listen to the text, read a line that was less difficult, or choose a line from the end of the text and practice reading it mentally before reading out loud. After completing our group reading, we would read the text again as a group, or I would read it out loud in its entirety for clarification purposes.

After reading a text, the class would engage in various forms of reader response. This was done to help clarify and articulate ideas, share insights, and organize thoughts that emerged from our readings of the text within a group context. Our primary methods of reader response were informal written responses and text rendering. Each helped to facilitate a richer engagement with the course texts.

After reading the text, we would often engage in an informal (i.e.,

uncollected) writing assignment that asked us to respond to some portion of the text. Many of the questions were predetermined based on Mr. Colombo and my lesson plan for the day, but others were developed within the class based on comments, emotions, or other things that emerged after the group reading. For some texts, the requested response was fairly broad, like “How did you feel about the text?” With other texts, such as “Love is Blind” by Eve, which deals with domestic violence, we asked more specific questions, like “What memories come to your mind as you read this story?” After writing our responses, we shared them with each other. Depending on the degree of sensitivity, the informal responses were either mandatory or voluntary.

The most common form of reader response that we used in Hip-Hop Lit was text rendering, in which readers of a text respond to a reading by reciting personally significant words, phrases, or sentences. This is done to delay initial response to texts and provoke thoughtful response (Robertson, 1990). After reading the text multiple times and taking a moment to reflect, everyone in the class was asked to write down a line or phrase and a word from the text that he or she found significant. Without comment, each person in the class would read the line or phrase that he or she selected until we returned to the first person. Then, without interruption, each person would read the word that he or she selected. After several minutes of silent reflection, we began to discuss and analyze both the text and our interpretations of the text rendering.

After the group discussion and reader response portions of the class, Mr. Colombo and I would shift into a more formal and guided analysis of the text and an introduction of key ideas that we wanted to discuss. At the beginning of the semester, we began this part of the class by asking basic questions, like “What was the main idea of the piece?” or “What was the author trying to say?” The remainder of the class time would be spent determining and debating the major themes of the text. As the semester progressed and students began to appropriate the language of formal critique that we were teaching, the questions and conversations became more complicated. For example, after reading “Suicidal Thoughts” by Notorious B.I.G. later in the semester, nearly the entire class quickly agreed that the text was intended as a suicide note and spent the remainder of the class analyzing the author’s rhyme scheme and debating the presence of irony in his use of religious imagery.

Like the rest of the Twilight Program, Hip-Hop Lit was a racially and ethnically diverse space. Of the 20 students enrolled in the course for the entire semester, 4 students were White, 3 were Cambodian, 2 were Latino, and 11 were African American. Several students were added to the course at the midway point of the school year, all of whom were

African American. The class's gender distribution was also consistent with the rest of the program, with 8 male students and 12 female students enrolled in the class.

With the exception of two people—Anita and Robin, the two oldest students in the program, were 22 and 23 years old, respectively—the students were between 16 and 19 years old. Most of them were former HHS day school students and had a preexisting relationship with either Mr. Colombo or me. Seven of the 12 female students and 1 of the 8 male students in the class indicated that they had children. Although student attendance was a constant concern of Mr. Colombo's and mine, most of the core group of Hip-Hop Lit students attended 3 days per week, which was significantly higher attendance than any other course in the program.

Because of the age of the students and our commitment to creating a more comfortable and democratic space, Hip-Hop Lit operated with few preestablished rules. The most explicit and strictly enforced rule that we established was that stories shared within the class were not to be shared with anyone outside the class. We also emphasized the importance of respecting everyone's stories and opinions by not laughing, teasing, antagonizing, or being overly intrusive. Other class rules were negotiated by the students, Mr. Colombo, and me during the first few classes of the year and at various points throughout the year as issues emerged. Profanity was permitted in class provided that it was neither excessive nor abusive. Specifically, students were strictly prohibited from using what Mr. Colombo and I termed to be "hateful words," such as *nigger*, *faggot*, or *bitch*, except when reading or commenting on a text.³ Despite the arbitrariness and potential for exploitation of the rules, students consistently honored their commitment to following what we collectively established. This is a critical point, both for gaining a richer understanding of the context and to fully appreciate the reasons for the highly provocative, informal, and potentially offensive language that often appears in the data that I provide in this article.

It was my assumption at the beginning of the semester that I would frequently defer to Mr. Colombo's expertise as an English teacher and let him direct much of the lessons. For the first few lessons, the division of labor was fairly reflective of this expectation, as Mr. Colombo played an active role in teaching the lessons. Soon, however, he informed me, "[I] thought it would be better if you taught the lessons and I fill in the gaps when you need me." I reluctantly agreed and led the lessons almost entirely by myself for the remainder of the semester. At moments when I could not remember or did not know a concept, I would ask Mr. Colombo to take over, and he would offer his assistance and return the

class to me. This typically one-sided relationship, which is explicated below and detailed more thoroughly elsewhere (Hill, 2006b), is reflected in my ethnographic representations of Mr. Colombo as an ancillary and occasionally invisible figure within Hip-Hop Lit.

FORMATION OF COMMUNITY

To fully understand the Hip-Hop Lit community, it is important to understand how its boundaries were established and policed in tacit, varied, and often complicated ways. Although they were not always explicitly articulated, multiple designations were used to assess and respond to an individual's status within the community. It was through these designations, and the practices undergirding them, that the classroom community was formed. Using the typology provided in this section, we are able to understand how the practices of wounded healing within Hip-Hop Lit positioned the various members of the community.

REGULARS

Within the class was a group of 11 students, the regulars, who formed the core of the community. Mr. Colombo and I depended on regulars to speak when there were lulls in conversation or no one seemed willing to answer questions that we deemed important. Other students also relied upon regulars to answer questions about class assignments and to be the first to respond to questions posed by Mr. Colombo and me. Although most of the regulars attended class daily, the primary criterion for being a regular was not attendance but participation in classroom conversations. For example, Anita, an Indian student who did not speak English fluently and rarely engaged in classroom conversation, was not considered a regular despite her daily attendance. Conversely, Shaheem, who almost never attended class more than twice a week but frequently participated, was considered a regular by the students and me. Although there were days when regulars elected not to participate, such moments were extremely rare.

Regulars understood their role, and many took pride in Mr. Colombo's and my dependency on them. When called on, they would often feign annoyance and demand to know why they were always "picked on" to answer questions. Privately, however, many intimated that they enjoyed the attention and respect of being considered regulars. Robin, who quickly became a regular, offered,

It don't really bother me that y'all be calling on me all the time.

Sometime I don't feel like talking' but I know you need me!
[laughs] Plus, it ain't no other class where we get treated like we
important because we got a story or something happened to us.

In addition to recognizing their own role, regulars used their position as classroom leaders to explicitly define or tacitly identify many of the other roles that emerged within the community.

OUTSIDERS

The boundaries of the class were most apparent when outsiders, those people who were not an official part of the class, approached or traversed them. The presence of outside students, teachers, and administrators almost always disturbed the rhythm of the class and disenabled many classroom conversations. Mr. Ormond once joked, "Damn, Marc, it's like you're running a cult in here. If I come in to look for a student or pick up attendance, everybody stops and looks at me like I'm crazy."

Mr. Ormond's remark alludes to the students' tendency to stop talking or change the conversation when outsiders entered the classroom. He made the comment after walking into the classroom during a conversation about relationships and love that emerged from reading "Ms. Jackson" by Outkast. Shaheem, a regular, had just begun to speak about his own experiences with his girlfriend. Although Shaheem was a regular, he rarely commented on topics that compromised the hypermasculine stance that he and his friends frequently assumed in class. On this day, however, Shaheem began to explain how Outkast member Andre 3000's use of imagery ("together dream about that crib with the Goodyear swing") reminded him of his own experience with his girlfriend and how they envisioned a life together before "things went downhill."

As he began his next sentence ("Love is crazy 'cause. . ."), Mr. Ormond walked in and quietly whispered something to Mr. Colombo. The moment that Mr. Ormond entered the room, Shaheem stopped talking. Intrigued by his vulnerability and interested in his comments, I encouraged Shaheem to finish. He replied, "[I] forgot what I was gonna say." After Mr. Ormond closed the door behind him, Shaheem smiled coyly and shouted, "Oh yeah! I remember," and then continued to share. Such occurrences were common because the presence of outsiders immediately affected the content and quality of classroom conversation.

Some of the students indicated that they did this because they felt, despite Mr. Colombo's and my frequent assurances to the contrary, that many of our conversations were inappropriate for school and could jeopardize the status of the class and our jobs. Most of the students, however,

expressed reluctance to share or comment on personal stories in front of people who were not a part of the class, even those with whom they had close out-of-class relationships.

For example, Stanley, a student from another class, would come into Hip-Hop Lit for a few minutes daily to speak to Jay, his best friend who was also a regular in Hip-Hop Lit. One day during the middle of the year, I noticed that I hadn't seen Stanley in over a month, and I asked Jay why he had stopped coming to school. He told me that Stanley still attended every day but no longer came into the class. I asked Jay why, genuinely assuring him that I had no problem with their daily interaction. Jay responded that he did not want to "disrespect the class" by having an outsider enter the class. He then pointed out that he would request a hall pass every day and leave Hip-Hop Lit to visit Stanley in his class, where "they don't do nothin' anyway." Jay's decision reflected the sentiment of many regulars that, unlike other classes, Hip-Hop Lit was a community that needed and deserved protection from nonmembers.

EXTRAS

In addition to the core number of students in Hip-Hop Lit who came to class frequently, there was a group of 4 or 5 students who attended class sporadically. Mr. Colombo labeled these students "extras," in reference to the insignificant (and typically nonspeaking) characters in a movie or television show. These students worked diligently when they came to class but often disappeared for several weeks at a time. Many of the extras were not interested in completing the program and only came to school to socialize with friends, buy or use marijuana and alcohol in the bathrooms, or satisfy the minimal conditions of their parole or probation by remaining on the active attendance roll. Although a few extras gained interest in the course and became regulars—Shaheem, for example, began the school year as an extra and became a regular—most remained on the periphery of the class for the entire school year.

Because of their poor attendance, extras devoted most of their time to answering old journal questions and completing outstanding class work. Although they would respond to questions about the course texts, extras rarely offered personal stories and only occasionally commented on the stories of other members of the class. Kwame, one of the extras, explained,

I know I don't come all the time so when I do, I don't wanna wreck y'all flow, y'ah mean? Y'all be talking about shit and I feel like I'm in y'all *business* [emphasis added] so I just fall back and

listen... [laughing] I don't really say much about myself 'cause I don't know y'all like that.

Kwame's feeling of being an outsider was reinforced by many of the regulars. An example of this came during a classroom conversation in which Ryan, another extra, attempted to interject in a conversation that the students were having about a story that a student had shared. Keneka, one of the regulars, turned to him and matter-of-factly said, "mind your business!" Keneka's comment reflected the general sentiment that extras were members of the class (which distinguishes them from outsiders) but not the wounded healing community.

LISTENERS

Unlike extras and outsiders, listeners were the 4 or 5 official members of the class who attended regularly but rarely participated in classroom conversations that involved personal disclosure. Some of the listeners were students like Anita, who attended daily but did not feel that she had anything to contribute to the class. Although Anita's reluctance was due in part to language difficulty, students like Michelle felt that their stories simply were not worth sharing: "Everybody be having deep stories and everything. I don't be having nothing to say except dumb shit so I just listen."

As this quote suggests, many of the listeners did not feel that their stories were legitimate for inclusion within the classroom. The belief that their stories weren't sufficiently "deep" prevented many students like Anita from participating in classroom conversation.

Other listeners, like Alisha, did not question the legitimacy of their stories but were uncomfortable offering their stories in front of the class: "I don't want to say nothing in class because I'm a private person. It's not that I don't want to participate. Like [long pause] I do the work and everything but I don't want to talk about stuff."

Regardless of their reasons for not participating, listeners usually demonstrated their engagement with the course through their journals. A typical example of this came as the students offered their journal responses to the question, "Have you or anyone you know ever considered suicide? What did you/they do?" Because of the sensitive nature of the question, we made sharing with the rest of the class optional. Nevertheless, as was almost always the case, nearly every student responded to the question as we went around the discussion circle. Alisha and Michelle, however, both insisted that they did not have a problem with sharing but had nothing to say about the topic. After class, I read

both of their responses:

Alisha: One time, me and my boyfriend broke up and I felt like I couldn't live without him. I wasn't really going to do nothing but you still think about it.

Michelle: I think everybody has thought about suicide at one time or another. Sometime things don't go the way you want them to and you are going to wonder if its worth it.

As their journal entries demonstrate, both Alisha and Michelle were capable of sharing stories that were relevant to the question and adequately personal. Further, as listeners, they were able to engage in wounded healing by sharing their stories through their journals while observing and partially participating in classroom healing practices. That they shared their stories with no one other than Mr. Colombo and me, however, created tensions between the listeners and the regulars.

Toward the middle of the year, as it became more apparent who was willing to speak, many regulars began to express their wariness of the listeners. As Dorene intimated to me in an after-class conversation:

Sometime I don't want to say shit because it be people in here that don't never say nothin'. It make you not wanna talk cause you not sure you could trust them. It's like when you got a girl-friend that you tell all your business to but she don't say none of hers. It make them seem shady, like "Who they telling my business to"?

Although Dorene's sentiments were not uncommon, they contradicted the listeners' explanations of how they responded to personal narratives in class. In response to a journal question, Michelle wrote,

I don't say a lot when people tell there stories but I listen and learn a lot. It feels good to hear that other people think the same way about stuff. Sometime I want to say something because I don't agree with everything but I don't. Still, I learned a whole lot.

Part of the regulars' misinterpretation of the listeners' motives was due to the fact that no one but Mr. Colombo and I knew the degree to which students like Michelle were engaging in and responding to storytelling through their journals. Although I would often say things to the class,

like, “Some of you write very interesting things in your journal but never speak in class,” to make it clear that the listeners weren’t merely eavesdropping on the regulars, our decision not to share the specifics of the listeners’ written responses undermined our attempts at eliminating some of the tensions.

Despite skepticism from many of the regulars, listeners were nonetheless met with a level of empathy and openness that was not reserved for outsiders and extras. Whereas extras were often rejected when they attempted to share advice or draw from their personal experiences, listeners were frequently encouraged to contribute to the class conversations. Mr. Colombo noted, “I think when kids like Michelle don’t talk, it’s different than other kids. It’s like, everybody knows she’s trying.” For example, during a conversation about drugs, I asked how many people in the class had smoked “weed” (marijuana). Michelle, whose hand was one of the many that were raised, added, “but I don’t no more.” Keneka responded half-playfully and half-authoritatively, “Why not? Now I *know* you got a story about weed ‘cause you smiling and you raised your hand.” Although we were clearly veering away from our primary conversation, I encouraged Michelle to comply with Keneka’s request. When Michelle declined, a look of disappointment appeared on the faces of Keneka and several other members of the class, including me. In addition to missing out on a potentially interesting story, at least a few of us were more disappointed that Michelle squandered an opportunity to move more closely to the center of the community.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Because of the practical constraints of participant observation, as well as the particular issues that developed because of Mr. Colombo’s failure to fully participate in the coteaching process, I video-recorded each Hip-Hop Lit class meeting. This enabled me to capture important moments that I missed while performing my coteaching duties and increase the reliability of other data collection methods. Although prior experience with video recording, both my own and that of other researchers, suggested that the presence of a video camera would not be unnecessarily intrusive or influential with regard to the normal functioning of the classroom, I acknowledged concerns about the potential effect of video cameras on classroom practice. Consequently, I evaluated the presence of the video camera early and several times throughout the data collection process to address potential validity issues. In addition, the camera was positioned outside the immediate purview of the students in an effort to minimize contrived behavior.

To record my observations, detailed handwritten and typed field notes were taken when students were completing classwork or Mr. Colombo was providing instruction. When possible, conversations were documented verbatim to accurately capture participants' statements. More important, because of the presence of the video camera, I gave careful attention to documenting conversations, images, thoughts, and other sensory information outside the view of the camera. Student work provided a critical source of data for this study. For this reason, student journal entries and classwork were collected and analyzed within individual composition books that I purchased, distributed, and stored throughout the semester. In addition, group classwork and creative projects, as well as homework, were collected throughout the semester.

Data analysis took place in various ways and at multiple times throughout my research. I reviewed available data from Hip-Hop Lit at multiple times throughout the collection phase to focus the research. In addition, analytic memos were kept throughout the data collection period to effectively preserve the content of assertions made at various stages of the research and to gain what Glaser (1978) called "theoretical sensitivity." As expected, the majority of analysis took place at the end of the data collection stage. After reading through the collected data, documents were coded and categorized to facilitate the development of theoretical concepts.

WOUNDED HEALING

As discussed earlier, one of the principal features of the Hip-Hop Lit curriculum was its focus on personal narratives. These narratives came primarily from two sources: the course texts and the members of the class. Because of the content of our thematic units (e.g., Love, Despair, Family), the course texts frequently took narrative form and were most often autobiographical in nature. For example, the unit on despair featured texts in which the authors described their personal circumstances to substantiate their feelings of hopelessness. In addition to their autobiographical focus, the course texts typically reflected what Forman (2002) calls the "extreme local," or hip-hop's narrative preoccupation with specific cities, area codes, neighborhoods, housing projects, and so on, within its texts. As Khaleef, a regular from Hip-Hop Lit noted, it was this focus on geographic specificity and local knowledge within the texts that enabled many of the class conversations:

The stuff we be readin' get us talking 'cause it's more real than

other stuff. . . Like, I can tell that [the stories] really happened to [the authors] because they tell us where they from and stuff about they 'hood. Plus the [stuff] they be goin' through is the same as we go through.

Khaleef's comment, which was echoed by many students throughout the semester, speaks to the importance of hip-hop's narratives for humanizing urban experiences by appending names and faces to otherwise distant and abstract narratives about urban ghettos (Hill, in press). It also demonstrates, as critical race theorists have argued (e.g., Delgado Bernal, 2002; Guinier & Torres, 2002), how such narratives enable oppressed people to recognize the commonality of their experiences. With regard to Hip-Hop Lit, the course texts served as counternarratives that contributed largely to the formation of a storytelling community in which students felt comfortable sharing their own personal stories.

As the school year advanced and students increased their level of engagement with the course texts, the practice of wounded healing began to take form. Through wounded healing, members of Hip-Hop Lit engaged in storytelling practices that challenged assumptions, assuaged various forms of pain, and produced new knowledge. I use the term *wounds* to refer to those narratives of pain, suffering, and injustice that mediate an individual's understanding and negotiation of the world; *healing* alludes to those storytelling practices that enabled students to recognize the commonality of their experiences, gain insight into their problems, and access new ideological perspectives. As such, to engage in wounded healing was to participate in a storytelling community in which members both exposed their wounds and tended to the wounds of others. It is important to note, however, that the term *healing* does not imply or infer a notion of completed recovery. Such a circumstance was neither an expressed goal nor a reasonable expectation for a space like Hip-Hop Lit. Rather, *healing* refers to an ongoing *process* of negotiating various personal and ideological struggles in reflective, collective, and productive fashion.

"I GOT A STORY TO TELL"

Although the students in Hip-Hop Lit expressed interest in the course from the beginning, they were generally reluctant to speak about their own personal experiences at the beginning of the school year. For the first month, classroom conversation was primarily limited to analysis of the course texts, with little explicit connection to students' personal experiences or stories. Although this reluctance was partly due to the

impersonal nature of our first unit, Roots of Hip-Hop and Literature, which contained only one autobiographical narrative, their discomfort with sharing personal information in front of strangers seemed to be the most important reason. As Jay, one of the students in the class, later told me,

It's like, at the beginning ain't nobody wanna talk . . . 'cause they ain't know nobody. You don't know who listenin' or what they gonna do. If my enemies is in here and I don't even know it, how I'm gon' tell them [something] that they could use against me? . . . But then it got cool when everybody started talking and it was like "oh, you gon' tell me this, then I'm gon' tell *you* this."

Dorene, Lisa, and Kristina, three other Hip-Hop Lit students with whom I later spoke, were even more specific about when and why the class began to talk:

Dorene: I know I wasn't gonna say nothin' if ain't nobody else say nothin'. I was like . . . "y'all ain't gonna be talking 'bout me when I leave." Then I remember Robin said something about love and it was deep and then everybody wanted to start saying stuff.

Lisa: Exactly!!

Kristina: True!!

Lisa: When Robin started talking, I felt like I could say whatever I had to say.

Kristina: I mean. I don't say much about myself. But if nobody else would talk, I wouldn't say *nothing*. Then she came with some ol' personal stuff and I was like "damn"! I could talk in here.

The moment to which these students alluded occurred early in October, as the class moved from the Roots of Hip-Hop and Literature unit to the Love unit. Our first reading from the unit was "Manifest" by Lauryn Hill, a first-person narrative about a bad relationship:

You see I loved hard once, but the love wasn't returned
I found out the man I'd die for, he wasn't even concerned
And time it turned
He tried to burn me like a perm

Though my eyes saw the deception, my heart wouldn't let me
learn
For um, some, dumb woman, was I,
And every time he'd lie he would cry and inside I'd die.
My heart must have died a thousand deaths
Compared myself to Toni Braxton thought I'd never catch my
breath
Nothing left, he stole the heart beating from my chest
I tried to call the cops, that type of thief you can't arrest
Pain suppressed, will lead to cardiac arrest
Diamonds deserve diamonds, but he convinced me I was
worth less
when my peoples would protest,
I told them mind their business, cause my shit was complex
More than just the sex
I was blessed, but couldn't feel like it when I was caressed
I'd spend nights clutching my breasts overwhelmed by God's
test
I was God's best contemplating death with a Gillette
But no man is ever worth the paradise manifest
(Fugees, 1996)

After reading "Manifest," we engaged in a spirited conversation about the meaning of particular parts of the song. Like other classes in the past, there was much debate over the meaning of the last two lines of the text. Although most students (along with Mr. Colombo and me) assumed that Lauryn Hill was contemplating suicide, several students emphatically argued that Hill was considering killing her lover with a razor. After debating over the meaning of the lines for a few minutes, one of the students who was vigorously advocating for the second interpretation rhetorically asked, "I mean, who would kill they *self* over somebody else?" I decided that his question provided a perfect segue for a more personal discussion of the text and responded, "That's an interesting question. Has anyone felt like Lauryn does in 'Manifest'? Not just the suicide part, either." The class suddenly grew quiet as heads began to shake left and right, indicating No. A few minutes later, class ended.

The following day, I began the class with a journal question that picked up where we had left off the previous day. The board read: "I loved hard once but the love wasn't returned.' Can you relate to this? If so, how?"

As soon as they entered the classroom, most of the students, as well as Mr. Colombo and I, sat down and wrote what appeared to be detailed responses to the question. After 15 minutes, I signaled the end of the

writing period by asking, “So who wants to share?” Two full minutes of nearly complete silence passed before being interrupted by Robin’s half-raised hand and soft voice.

“I do. I got a story to tell,” Robin said, without moving her eyes from her notebook. Robin is a short, heavy-set Cambodian girl with big bright cheeks and a quiet demeanor. She is 23 years old and has lived on her own since she became pregnant at 16 and her parents forced her to leave home. She works full time at a local supermarket and raises her 2-year-old biracial son without help from his father, whom she hasn’t seen in 18 months. When she leans forward, the slightly undersized velour sweatshirt that she wears almost daily reveals the bottom half of a large red tattoo written across her back that reads, “LOVE HURTS.” Robin is the oldest student in the class and hasn’t been to school since she dropped out 7 years ago. Unable to find a steady job, she decided to return to school to obtain her diploma and continue on to college to better provide for her son. She doesn’t say much to the other students, which gives her an air of mysteriousness that causes them to listen to her with curious attention whenever she speaks.

“I loved hard once,” she said, barely above a whisper. After a deliberate but unpretentious pause she continued,

I mean, I know exactly what she talking about. I was in love with this boy when I was young. I gave him everything. I put him above everybody including my father. Everybody told me I was trippin’ but I ain’t listen. I gave him everything and he didn’t love me for real for real. I got pregnant and he just left. If it wasn’t for my son, I don’t know what I would’ve did to myself. I knew he needed me. Otherwise, I don’t know.

Robin’s personal narrative, which many of the students, Mr. Colombo, and I all recollect as the first one articulated within the class, represents the most important and difficult component of wounded healing: *personal disclosure*. As she later told me, her willingness to expose her wounds by sharing a personal and painful story was animated by a desire to “help somebody else through they own shit.” Although there was no indication that the story that Robin shared related to another student’s personal experience, it nonetheless facilitated the development of a classroom community in which students shared their own stories and responded to others.

Robin’s decision to tell her story marked a watershed moment in the Hip-Hop Lit school year because it encouraged other students to engage in similar storytelling acts. As Kristina noted above, Robin’s disclosure

showed the other members of the class that they “could talk in here.” Kristina’s use of *could* is critical because it refers not to the students having official permission to tell their stories, because the course was explicitly designed to encourage storytelling. Rather, *could* refers to the construction of new possibilities for members of Hip-Hop Lit. By offering her story, Robin enabled the other students in Hip-Hop Lit to begin imagining the classroom as a potentially safe site for sharing their stories. After her disclosure, many students began to explore the possibilities of the classroom for storytelling by increasing the frequency, depth, and personal nature of their stories.

Like Robin’s story, the most personal and engaging narratives that were shared in class typically emerged unexpectedly during normal classroom instruction. Students would insert their stories into the conversation and, after they received a response, return to their previous activity. These events typically lasted no more than a few minutes and rarely subverted the rhythm of the class despite their apparent disconnection from the formal curriculum. An example of this occurred as I was teaching a lesson on mood and tone using Tupac’s “Dear Mama”:

Me: [S]o what is the mood of this piece?

Joe: Sad.

Me: Why?

Joe: After all . . . he went through with his moms, he had to be sad.

Me: But isn’t he thanking her for being a good mom in spite of everything?

Joe: Yeah but you gotta be sad going through that. Me and mom and my brother went through the same shit.

Jay: Me too. More me than my brother but my pop wasn’t there so shit gonna be sad. But you still happy ‘cause you made it through.

Me: I know he might’ve been sad thinking about everything they went through. Just like y’all probably did. But if you made it and everybody was listening to your story, how you think they would feel?

Joe: I think they would feel better. Like “Joe went through that and became a rapper or whatever so it don’t gotta turn out f-ed up.”

Jay: Exactly. Like “y’all could learn from my pain.”

Me: OK. OK. That’s what mood is all about. Not so much what the writer is feeling but how might the reader feel when he [sic] reads it. So what would be a good word to describe how you might feel when you read this?

Jay: Better

Kenef: Happy. Like y’all said, you might feel better knowing it ain’t gotta end up all crazy.

Me: What might be a good word for that?

Mr. Colombo: How about hopeful?

Me: Hopeful! That sounds good. Let’s say the mood is hopeful. Now, y’all really answered this, but what would you say is the tone of the piece?

From my perspective, two things were happening simultaneously during this interaction. After I solicited a response to my question about the mood of the text, Joe and Jay answered by saying that the mood was sad and offered personal stories to justify their response. For them, “Dear Mama” was sad because they had similar personal stories that they relied on to understand how Tupac was feeling; the mood was sad because they remembered being sad in their own respective experiences. Although I challenged their interpretation because I was unsatisfied with their answer, which appeared to conflate mood (the atmosphere of the narrative) and tone (the character’s state of being)—Tupac’s “Dear Mama” is a tribute to his mother that, despite its often disturbing content, was presumably written to invoke joy, not sadness, from the audience—the personal narratives that informed their reading of the text nonetheless provided a critical point of entry for teaching the day’s lesson. Equally important, the Hip-Hop Lit classroom enabled a space for wounds to be exposed and healed through the acts of cosigning and challenging.

COSIGNING

One of the primary ways that members of the classroom community responded to personal disclosures was through the act of *cosigning*, in which members of the community would provide affirmation for the person exposing his or her wound. Cosigning served two functions: substantiating the truth-value of the narrative and encouraging the speaker to continue. Cosigning practices included nonverbal cues (e.g., head nods, empathetic facial gestures), interjections (e.g., “Exactly!” or “Mm hmm”), and, most important, complementary stories. Such narrative practices can be located within the homiletical tradition of the Black church, where call-and-response interactions are engaged by the preacher and the congregation to stimulate the listener and encourage the speaker (Smitherman, 1977). These practices are equally apparent during the act of “testifyin’,” in which a member of the congregation shares a personal story within the formal church service as a means by which to affirm the goodness of God (Smitherman). Within this space, personal stories are often buttressed by an additional story from another member of the church community, thereby acknowledging both the commonality and the legitimacy of the narrative.

In the above interaction, Jay cosigned Joe’s narrative by offering a complementary story that articulated the commonality of their respective experiences with their fathers. Although such interactions may have served a therapeutic purpose, they also served the additional (and with regard to the classroom, primary) purpose of enabling a “teachable moment” wherein we were able to make an effective bridge between student narratives and the curriculum. Although I could have disregarded their narratives and simply explained the differences between mood and tone, I instead attempted to validate their stories by using them as a part of the lesson. As many of the students noted, this approach yielded enormous personal and practical benefits:

Jay: The stuff we be learning is interesting even if we ain’t talk about hip-hop. But the fact that we get to talk about our own stories make it easier to relate to everybody.

Robin: Plus, sometimes in school stuff can get boring and you don’t even try to understand it. When you be connecting it to our lives it’s easier to follow and better to understand.

Dorene: Exactly. I learn stuff easier when I could relate to it. Plus, when you get to know everybody better, with their stories and everything, it's easier to relax and pay attention.

As the students' comments suggest, it was these acts of individual disclosure and our collective response to them—both of which occurred on a daily basis—that enabled the construction of the classroom community and served as a suitable hook for sustaining student interest.

CHALLENGING

In addition to cosigning, students often responded to personal disclosures through the act of challenging. Unlike cosigning, which was a common response to all types of stories, challenging only occurred when members of Hip-Hop Lit exposed wounds that were explicitly ideological. In my use of the term *ideological wounds*, I am not alluding (as do many critical pedagogues; Ellsworth, 1989) to “false consciousness” or a dogmatic neo-Marxian belief that the students' conceptions of the world were “damaged” by their personal experiences and therefore in need of repair. Rather, many of the beliefs about the world that were articulated within Hip-Hop Lit were largely shaped by painful encounters with forces of inequality and marginalization that had not been previously articulated or critically examined. The conversations that emerged from these ideological narratives were therefore not less personal but less *personalized*, because the entire class was able to use a particular narrative to challenge individual and collective worldviews within a relatively safe space.

Like cosigning, challenging took both verbal and nonverbal forms, the most significant being the offering of a competing narrative. Unlike personal wounds, the exposure of ideological wounds frequently led to longer, more inclusive conversations that took the class away from the planned lesson. Although the conversations that emerged from challenging were often intense, they rarely became antagonistic. The following example of this type of conversation came on the day that we read “Project Window” by Nas as part of a lesson about imagery. After discussing Nas's use of imagery in his description of the Queensbridge Housing Projects, I initiated a conversation about the relationship between “Project Window” and the students' ideas about neighborhoods:

Me: So how does the imagery that Nas uses connect to your own ideas about neighborhoods?

Kia [Af-Am]: It reminded me about how neighborhoods turn into “hoods.”

Me: What do you mean?

Kia: Black people don’t know how to keep they neighborhoods. Look at where we live. Everytime I come outside people be selling drugs and they be shooting all the time. The same stuff that Nas talkin’ about.

Dorene [Af-Am]: Exactly. White people keep they house clean on the outside. Black people throw stuff everywhere. That’s why the hood look like it do. It don’t be crackheads and stuff around White people neighborhoods.

Maggie [White] Shiiiiit. That ain’t true. It’s crackheads and trash and stuff in my neighborhood too!

Kia: But it’s different though. Y’all got silver spoons in y’all mouths. Y’all dads got companies that y’all can work at and we gotta start from the bottom. It’s different when you don’t got money.

Maggie: I ain’t got no money!

Lisa [White]: Me neither . . . Plus, I live two blocks from y’all!

This interaction represents a frequent occurrence when students explicitly linked their ideological positions to personal disclosures. In this instance, Kia explained that her conception of the Black neighborhood was informed by her experiences within her own neighborhood. Dorene cosigned the story by explaining the relationship between race and the quality of neighborhoods. Maggie, a White student in the class, then pushed the conversation into a different direction by challenging Kia with a competing story.

For Maggie, the students’ romantic conception of “White neighborhoods” contradicted her own experiences as a White person living under circumstances similar to those of Dorene and Kia. Lisa cosigned Maggie’s challenge by pointing out that all the students in the conversation lived in the same neighborhood, thereby complicating Dorene’s and Kia’s arguments about the relationship between racial identity and class position. As was usually the case, this exchange quickly ended, and we

returned to our formal lesson. Nevertheless, the ideas discussed became reference points for further conversations, because the students, Mr. Colombo, and I would use future class conversations and course texts to cosign or challenge earlier claims. Through this practice, students would engage in closer readings of the texts, as well as sustained analyses of the issues raised in class.

HEALING

Through the acts of personal disclosure, cosigning, and challenging, members of Hip-Hop Lit were able to engage in processes of healing. It is worth reiterating, however, that my use of *healing* neither presumes nor suggests a completed medical, psychological, or ideological recovery. Rather, it refers to the process by which members of Hip-Hop Lit were able to find varying levels of insight, relief, support, empathy, and critique within the Hip-Hop Lit community for their personal and ideological wounds.

For many students, the process of healing was primarily linked to the act of personal disclosure. Although they benefited from the community's response to their narratives, students in Hip-Hop Lit often mentioned how important it was to offer their stories in full public view, regardless of the particular response that they received. This sentiment was captured by Robin, who remarked, "Even though people say good stuff to each other, sometime it just feel good to say stuff out loud." Other students in the class offered a similar perspective about the importance of "saying stuff out loud":

Lisa: When you tell a story in front of everybody, sometimes it feel good just to get it off your chest.

Dorene: Me too! Sometimes I don't even need nobody to say nothing. I just need get something off my chest. Like the time I was talking about all the drama with my baby father. Just talkin' about how he hurt me made me feel better because I never said it out loud before.

Although the benefits of public disclosure did not always hinge upon the community's response, the relative safety of the classroom space was nonetheless crucial for enabling such disclosures. In an interview, Lisa and Dorene explained the importance of the classroom community:

Me: Now that you know how good it feels to get stuff of your chest, do you find yourself doing it more often?

Lisa: Yes and no. I be trying but it's hard because even though it feel good just to say it sometimes, you can't just say it *anywhere*. I can say it in here cause I know everybody and that's how we get down.

Dorene: Exactly. Even if don't nobody say nothing, you gotta know that if you *need* some support or whatever, somebody gon' be there. Plus you gotta know people ain't gonna tell all your business.

Lisa: Plus I don't be thinkin' about this stuff until we be readin'.

Lisa's and Dorene's observations underscore the importance of the Hip-Hop Lit community in facilitating the healing process. Even when people found healing primarily in the act of disclosure, Hip-Hop Lit served as a safe space in which people felt that their disclosures could be heard, responded to, and protected. In addition, the narratives within the course texts often connected to students' experiences in ways that created organic opportunities for disclosure.

Although many students found relief in personal disclosures, most students, including those mentioned above, often spoke about the value of engaging with the stories of their classmates. In the case of Joe and Jay, understanding the commonality of their experiences with their fathers was a critical part of their healing process. As Joe explained,

It just feel good sometimes to hear that other people is goin' through the same [stuff]. Me and Jay not even that cool. I mean we don't got beef or nothin' but I don't know him like that. . . . But he still was like "I been through the same bullshit with my pops." That shit is so real because sometimes you be like "Why this had to happen to me?" Then you realize that it happens to everybody.

In a separate conversation, Jay added, "It's crazy cause you might not even know somebody but you could still feel they pain. You don't be *happy* 'cause they goin' through it but it feel good to know it's not just you." For Joe and Jay, the usefulness of their interaction rested upon its ability to expose the commonality of their experiences.

In addition to providing personal pleasure for students, the process of healing also informed students' performance of classroom assignments. For example, Joe and Jay used class assignments to negotiate their issues with their absentee fathers. As part of a creative writing assignment in our Despair unit, Jay and Joe began to work collaboratively on a rap about a young boy in the ghetto who contemplates suicide after finding out that his "deadbeat" father lived around the corner from him but did not want to meet him. Other students, such as Robin, Dorene, and Lisa, frequently used their journal assignments to write about abusive relationships. At the end of the semester, they spoke about the importance of class activities for the healing process:

Lisa: Even though we were learning literature and writing, we also got to deal with personal stuff. By the end of the year I felt a lot better.

Dorene: Yeah, like every time we wrote about our triflin' boyfriends, I learned how to avoid [them] in the future.

Lisa: Plus we got cool with each other because we was all in the same boat!

Dorene: Yeah, 'cause I used to think it was all my fault. By the end it was all good.

In a separate interview, Joe expressed a similar feeling:

When Joe and I made that song about the kid who lost his pop, we got real cool. Before that, we didn't really know each other but after that we became like family. It was mad cool to learn that everybody has struggles and, by the end of the class, I wasn't as mad anymore. Don't get me wrong, I'm not over it but I'm dealing better.

Although some of the students may have overstated the transformative effects of the class, they nonetheless speak to the possibilities of Hip-Hop Lit for enabling the healing process.

TEACHING (AS) WOUNDED HEALERS (OR NOT)

As indicated earlier, many roles developed in the classroom community in relationship to the practices of wounded healing. With respect to Mr.

Colombo and me, these roles were further complicated by the teacher-student power relationships within the class. Despite our common position as coteachers, each of us responded to our position within the storytelling community in drastically different ways.

My position within Hip-Hop Lit underwent dramatic shifts throughout the year. Like many of the students, I was extremely apprehensive at the beginning of the semester about sharing my personal stories in full public view. As such, my primary role at the beginning of the year was that of a listener. Because of my position as a teacher, I was often favorably positioned in a relationship of *one-sided storytelling*, in which a person or group offers personal narratives as the other person or group is empowered to listen, judge, and respond based on their assessment of the narrative. In the case of Hip-Hop Lit, the students would tell their personal stories while Mr. Colombo and I listened and responded.

Like in most urban schools, one-sided storytelling extended beyond the bounds of the formal curriculum and into other “hidden” dimensions of the classroom. For example, early in the year, Robin approached me and told me that she had been absent the previous day because she could not find child care. She told me that she could not afford her usual babysitter because she did not have enough money, and her son’s father was not providing financial support. Although she did not have to provide as much personal detail as she did, the program’s allegedly strict attendance policy forced students to provide “an *acceptable* [italics added] excuse for all absences” (Twilight Program Memo). By positioning teachers and administrators as arbiters of acceptability, students who were unable to attend class or stay for the entire period because of court appearances, child care issues, or other personal problems were forced to disclose these deeply personal parts of their lives to relative strangers who offered judgment (approval, dismissal, and so on) in exchange.

The one-sided nature of this relationship first became apparent to me in mid-October when I entered the class wearing a “North Philly” T-shirt. One of the students immediately said to me, “What you doin’ with a N.P. shirt on?” I explained to their amazement that “I was born on Luzerne Street,” a well-known street in North Philadelphia. Up to that point, the students did not know that I was born and partly raised in North Philadelphia, even though I knew the neighborhoods, streets, and often the houses in which they lived. Such events were extremely common in Hip-Hop Lit, just as they are in other traditional and nontraditional educational settings, where students are explicitly or implicitly coerced into exposing their personal selves while teachers and other authority figures are empowered to decide which stories they want to reveal.

The practice of one-sided storytelling was equally evident, though far

more complicated, as Mr. Colombo and I began to teach Hip-Hop Lit. As students wrote in their daily journals, Mr. Colombo and I, per our agreement with the class, would respond to the question of the day in our own journals. Although we responded to each question—at times, however, teaching demands allowed us only enough time to give an oral response—our early responses were, like the rest of the class, relatively impersonal. By the time the Love unit began, however, my responses became increasingly personal. During the love unit, in response to the question “I loved hard once. . . ,” I read the following response from my journal after Robin shared hers:

I loved a girl once when I lived in Atlanta for college. We were friends since I was seventeen and I fell in love with her, although I didn’t realize it until later. She loved me as a friend but not in a romantic way. I never told her how I felt until I saw her . . . the summer before last. She gave me the impression that we had a chance but when I got home she fronted on me. I was sick about that for a minute.

Disclosures like this one became common for me within the class. Despite their personal appearance, however, these stories required little effort for me to share. It was not until later in the year that I became comfortable enough to share the stories in which I had a personal, emotional investment and a genuine need for healing. One of the first occasions occurred as we began the Family unit.

During the Family unit, we read “Ms. Jackson” by Outkast, in which Big Boi and Andre 3000 (the group’s members) write letters to Ms. Jackson, the fictional grandmother (whom they call the “baby’s momma’s momma”) of their children. We began a discussion of Andre 3000’s use of imagery in the second verse of the song:

Ten times out of nine
Now if I’m lyin’, fine
The quickest muzzle throw it on my mouth and I’ll decline
King meets queen, then the puppy love thing, together dream
‘Bout that crib with the Goodyear swing
On the oak tree, I hope we feel like this forever
Forever, forever, ever? Forever, ever?
Forever never seem that long until you’re grown
And notice that the day-by-day ruler can’t be too wrong
Ms. Jackson my intentions were good I wish I could
Become a magician to abracadabra all the sadder

Thoughts of me, thoughts of she, thoughts of he
Askin' what happened to the feelin' that her and me
Had, I pray so much about it need some knee, pads
It happened for a reason one can't be, mad
So know this, know that everything's cool
And yes I will be present on the first day of school, and graduation
(Benjamin, 2000)

We performed a text rendering of the song and many of the students read "Forever, forever, ever. Forever, ever?" and others, including me, read "Forever never seem that long until you grown" as the line that stood out to them. I asked the students to talk about why those two lines were so significant, and several responded with stories about relationships that they thought would last forever but abruptly ended. While I nodded with approval as the students told their stories, Dorene stared at me quizzically before finally asking, "What *you* know about this, Mr. Hill?" I fought the urge to ignore or playfully dismiss her question, as I had often done up to that point when faced with a personal question. Instead, I responded,

That line, "Forever never seem that long until you're grown" is deep to me. I mean, I'm thinking about the song and how I can feel that in my own life. I have a baby on the way right now that I didn't expect. Her mom is 6 months pregnant and I'm really stressin' about it. I ain't worried about money or nothin' like that. It's just . . . I wasn't expecting this and she and I not together and she [the mother] gotta be in my life forever. So I'm like "*Forever*, ever? *Forever* ever?" That's a long ass time! [class laughs] This just wasn't how I thought about it back when I was a kid. I thought I'd end up married to the person that I have kids with and even when she told me she was pregnant the thought crossed my mind to just get married but I knew that wasn't right because I would've been miserable.

The class suddenly grew quiet as the students and Mr. Colombo stared at me to see if I was done sharing. When they seemed confident that I was, they began to respond:

Hakeem: I feel you. Baby moms be trippin'.

Kanef: You should know! All them kids you got!!

Hakeem: Shut up! I'm serious. Mr. Hill, I went through the same . . . I thought I was gonna be wit' my baby mom and then [it] got crazy.

Me: It's not that I wanted to be with her. It just crossed my mind. . .

Dorene: That's 'cause everybody act like it's what you supposed to do but you gotta do what's best for you. It's like the song say, forever is a long time.

Me: Yeah you right. "Forever never seem that long until you grown."

Hakeem: You just gotta make sure that she don't get mad . . . about money or 'cause you not messin' with her and not let you see the kids.

Me: [looking at the entire class] I feel you. Based on what we've read, how do you y'all think Andre and Big Boi feel about their situations?

This brief interaction, which I deliberately ended by posing a question about the text, is significant because it was the first time that I exposed my own wounds in front of the students. After class I wrote,

I told the students about my situation with the baby. I was surprised at how thoughtful and helpful they were when they heard about my story. Even more surprising to me is how much better I felt about the situation after talking to them. Although they didn't tell me anything that I didn't already know, there was something special about sharing that particular experience with my students.

Hakeem, who was 17 years old with two children born 1 month apart, and Dorene, who was 18 years old with a 6-month-old baby, both listened to my story and responded with advice that was thoughtful, helpful, and informed by their own personal experiences. For the first time, I felt like I was not in complete control of the class as a teacher, but another member of the storytelling community. Although my power to end the conversation when I deemed it appropriate affirms that I never completely ceded my authority as teacher, there was nonetheless a moment in class

when I felt as if my story was no more or less important than the others.

According to Keneka, one of the most engaged regulars in Hip-Hop Lit, it was this type of practice that strengthened the bond between the students and me. She told me, “[the] only reason how you . . . get with us is because you be tellin’ us your lifetime stories. You don’t lie. You keep it real.” As Keneka’s quote suggests, it was not only my willingness to expose my wounds but also the coherence of my particular wounds with their own that helped legitimate my status within the community. To many of the students in Hip-Hop Lit, my life was “real” enough to warrant entry into the community.

Mr. Colombo, however, experienced great difficulty joining the community of wounded healers. Like several of the students, Mr. Colombo was extremely uncomfortable sharing his stories in class. He also saw his position as teacher as prohibitive with regard to storytelling. After the students left class on the day that I told the students my story about the baby, Mr. Colombo said to me “Wow. You told them a *lot*.” I asked if he could share such a personal story, and he replied, “I mean. I don’t mind telling them stuff but some stuff I think teachers shouldn’t tell students. You want them to see you in a certain way and they’re lookin’ for stuff to use against you.” As Mr. Colombo was telling me this, I felt as if he was both explaining his own stance and subtly offering advice that he hoped would dissuade me from further such disclosures.

Mr. Colombo’s position on personal disclosure quickly became apparent to the students as the school year persisted. Whereas students who were designated as “listeners” were met with a mix of empathy and wariness, Mr. Colombo’s silence was uniformly rejected by the students, who would frequently request that he share “real” stories. By the middle of the year, the students’ disdain for Mr. Colombo’s reticence was reflected in their interactions with him. For example, when Mr. Colombo would ask a question, Dorene (a regular) and Angel (an extra), would mockingly ask (in a caricaturesque middle-American White male voice), “How do *you* feel about this Colombo? What does this remind *you* of?” Mr. Colombo would typically respond by laughing and changing the subject or saying, “I’m more interested in what *you* guys think.”

One day, when Mr. Colombo did not come to school and I was teaching the class by myself, Dorene sparked the following conversation:

Dorene: How come Mr. Colombo don’t never tell us nothing?

Me: What do you mean?

Dorene: You know what I’m talkin’ about, Mr. Hill. You be talkin’

and telling us stuff but if you ask him something, he don't wanna say nothin'.

Keneka: I know! He act like he too good to talk.

Me: I don't think it's that. . . . Maybe he's just not comfortable yet.

Keneka: How you gonna ask us to do all this talkin' and [in a mocking voice] "sharing our feelings" and you don't say nothing. That shit is corny.

Josh: I don't he think he do it on purpose. He just, y'ah mean, he can't relate 'cause he's from, you know, a different culture so he don't want to say nothin'.

Dorene: N'aah. Other people can't relate too but they try [pauses]. And he a *teacher*.

As Dorene pointed out, Mr. Colombo's position as teacher created a different set of expectations with regard to his participation. Whereas other "listeners" were excused for their lack of participation or at worst viewed skeptically, Mr. Colombo was expected to offer more of himself because of his extraordinary access to students' stories and his perceived power in relation to the students.

Despite his refusal to offer personal narratives, Mr. Colombo did not express any dissonance about listening to other students' stories. In fact, hearing student stories was a critical part of the agenda that largely informed our curriculum development process. Nevertheless, Mr. Colombo was at his quietest when students offered their own stories. Typically, Mr. Colombo would listen as students shared their ideas, beliefs, and personal stories and offer little in response except for a perfunctory nod of his head or an empathetic "thank you." He rarely discussed student stories within our curriculum meetings, and he admittedly did not attempt to let the stories inform his teaching. He told me,

I feel like we're helping the kids by listening to them. I'm guessing that a lot of the stuff that they tell us they don't get to tell anybody else. And to be honest, I think it's interesting what they're telling us. I'm learning a lot about kids . . . not just the kids in class but other kids like them.

As his comment suggests, Mr. Colombo was often positioned within the class as a voyeur who engaged in one-sided storytelling for the purpose of what Foucault (1990) called “the pleasure of analysis,” or a self-centered obsession with the sources of pleasure (or in this case pain) of another person. It was this type of surveillance, or at least its perception, that further marginalized Mr. Colombo within the class.

The relationship between Mr. Colombo, me, and the rest of the Hip-Hop Lit community with regard to storytelling is critical for understanding the power dynamics of the class. Although teachers can never relinquish classroom power (Gore, 1998; O'Reilly, 1993), the willingness to render oneself vulnerable can reorganize classroom power relations in ways that allow for more democratic, engaged, and productive practices. Such a gesture is particularly important in spaces like Hip-Hop Lit, where students are being asked to confess desires, share secrets, or otherwise offer aspects of themselves that have been traditionally excluded from the formal schooling process. By contrast, the failure to do so can further marginalize and silence both students and teachers in ways that undermine the spirit of wounded healing.

OPEN(ING) WOUNDS: ACTS OF SILENCING AND HURTING

Despite the collective success of Hip-Hop Lit in creating a community of wounded healers, there were clear tensions that appeared as the conversations became more personal. Because of the high level of intimacy within the community, members occasionally took the liberty of asking questions and telling stories that were potentially uncomfortable to others. When it became clear that a question was “too much” for someone, Mr. Colombo and I (and sometimes other regulars within the class) would redirect the conversation to another person or topic. The success of our attempts, however, was dependent on the students’ ability and desire to expose their discomfort and our ability to respond effectively. What we often failed to do, however, was listen to the silences and acts of silencing (Fine, 1991; Schultz, 2003) that our conversations created. The most memorable example of this came through the following vignette. Although it represents the most extreme instance, the vignette nonetheless serves as a telling case that illustrates some of the fundamental tensions and problems that developed within the Hip-Hop Lit community.

KENEKA

As was our daily practice, I sent the day’s journal question as a cellular text message to Mr. Colombo as I rushed to Howard High so that the

students could begin writing before I arrived. We were beginning the second section of our unit on family, which dealt with abortion, and I did not want my tardiness to cause us to lose any discussion time for what I expected to be a very spirited and engaged conversation. No sooner had I walked through the classroom door did I hear the voice of Keneka, who demanded that I tell her why I had chosen the day's journal question.

Keneka was a tall 18-year-old African American girl whose bright smile often betrayed the tough front that she offered her classmates and teachers. Before returning to graduate school, I had been Keneka's Spanish teacher during day school, and I also had been her summer school Spanish teacher for the past two summers. During that time, Keneka and I had developed a playfully antagonistic relationship that, to the uninitiated, would look like blatant and mutual disrespect. In front of other people, she and I would argue, tease each other, and even feign irritation at the sound of the other's voice. Mr. Colombo once remarked that he had never seen two people, much less a student and teacher, interact with each other the way Keneka and I did. His remark, which seemed to reflect the attitude of most of our audiences, did not matter to us. Our relationship was an unspoken inside joke that only we shared, and it was my understanding of our relationship that mediated my interactions with her on this day.

I responded to Keneka by joking that Mr. Colombo had picked the question and that I was as surprised as she was at the nature of the question. Unfazed by my attempts at humor, she sternly replied "No he didn't. He already showed us the text [message] you had sent him. Why did you pick *that*??!!!" She then pointed to the day's question and read each word with such disgust that it seemed as if she could taste the words: "Do you believe in abortion? Explain. If you have a story, please share." As I scrambled to think of an appropriate response to Keneka's question, I looked around the room and noticed that several students, all female, were not writing anything. Because the students were frequently resistant to journal writing, I dismissed their inactivity as coincidental and decided that Keneka's concerns were not reflective of the rest of the class. I also assumed that Keneka was not angry but merely upping the stakes in our daily game of the verbal sparring.

After the students finished writing in their journals, I asked them to share their responses. One by one, each student answered the question and provided an explanation for why he or she believed in or disapproved of abortions. When I got to Keneka, the following exchange occurred:

Me: What do you think?

Keneka: Yeah.

Me: What do you mean, “yeah”???

Keneka: Yeah!!!!!!

As was our daily ritual, Keneka gave a one-word answer to a question (“Do you believe in abortion?”) for which I clearly wanted and asked for a detailed response. Normally, after a bit of prodding, Keneka would follow with a long and thoughtful response to the day’s question. This time, however, she closed her book and turned to the person next to her, signifying that she was done participating in the activity. I decided not to push her further and moved on to the next student.

After the rest of the students read their entries, Mr. Colombo distributed our reading for the day, “Retrospect for Life” by Common (1997). Through text rendering, we read the entire piece:

Knowin’ you the best part of life, do I have the right to take yours
‘Cause I created you, irresponsibly
Subconsciously, knowin’ the act I was a part of
The start of somethin’, I’m not ready to bring into the world
Had myself believin’ I was thorough
I look into mother’s stomach, wonder if you are a boy or a girl
Turnin’ this woman’s womb into a tomb
But she and I agreed, a seed we don’t need
You would’ve been much more than a mouth to feed
But someone, I woulda fed this information I read
To someone, my life for you I woulda had to lead
Instead I led you to death
I’m sorry for takin’ your first breath, first step, and first cry
But I wasn’t prepared mentally nor financially
Havin’ a child shouldn’t have to bring out the man in me
Plus I wanted you to be raised within a family
I don’t wanna, go through the drama of havin’ a baby’s momma
Weekend visits and buyin’ J’s ain’t gon’ make me a father
For a while bearing a child is somethin’ I never wanted to do
For me to live forever I can only do that through you
Nerve I got to talk about them niggaz with a gun

Must have really thought I was God to take the life of my son
 I could have sacrificed goin' out
 To think my homies who did it I used to joke about, from now on
 I'ma use self control instead of birth control
 Cause \$315 ain't worth your soul
 \$315 ain't worth your soul
 \$315 ain't worth it

Seeing you as a present and a gift in itself
 You had our child in you, I probably never feel what you felt
 But you dealt with it like the strong black woman you are
 Through our trials and tribulations, child's elimination
 An integration of thoughts I feel about the situation
 Back and forth my feelings was pacin'
 Happy deep down but not joyed enough to have it
 But even that's a lie, in less than two weeks, we was back at it
 Is this unprotected love or safe to say it's lust
 Bustin', more than a sweat in somebody you trust
 Or is it that we don't trust each other enough
 And believe, havin' this child'll make us have to stay together
 Girl I want you in my life cause you have made it better
 Thinkin' we all in love cause we can spend a day together
 We talkin' spendin' the rest of our lives
 It's too many black women that can say they mothers
 But can't say that they wives
 I wouldn't chose any other to mother my understanding
 But I want our parenthood to come from planning
 It's so much in my life that's undone
 We gotta see eye to eye, about family, before we can become one
 If you had decided to have it the situation I wouldn't run from
 But I'm walkin', findin' myself and my God
 So I can, discipline my son with my Rod
 Not have a judge tellin' me how and when to raise my seed
 Though his death was at our greed, with no one else to blame
 I had a book of African names, case our minds changed
 You say your period hasn't came, and lately I've been sleepy
 So quit smokin' the weed and the beadies and let's have this boy
 (Lynn, 1997)

After doing a text rendering of "Retrospect for Life," I attempted to start a class discussion about the song by posing several questions: Who is Common addressing in this text? What is the tone of the piece? What did

Common mean by “Three hundred and fifteen dollars ain’t worth your soul?” Instead of the normal blend of waving hands and competing voices, I was met with a curious silence that intensified as my questions persisted. Determined to keep the class moving, I began to look for regulars to call on to answer my questions. As my eyes scanned the room, students’ heads and bodies began to turn to avoid making eye contact with me.

Finally, after several long minutes passed with little progress, I wondered out loud, “How come y’all not answering the questions?” Keneka, who had been slumped in her seat and seemingly inattentive, jumped to attention as if she had been waiting all day for the question. Without hesitation, she said, “Because they didn’t like the song!” Although slightly relieved that she was paying attention, I was more annoyed by the confidence with which she spoke for the entire class. “Retrospect for Life” was one of my favorite songs, and its discussion of a regretted abortion seemed extremely provocative. I was convinced that either Keneka was having a bad day and being belligerent (which was not uncommon for her) or that she was simply mistaken about the class’s opinion. Determined to prove that she was in the minority, I responded to her comment:

Me: Well, don’t speak for everybody. But why don’t *you* like the song?”

Keneka: Because I didn’t.

Me: I need a more elaborate response to than that. We’re in a . . .

Keneka: [much louder and seemingly annoyed] Because I *didn’t*!

I was now sure that Keneka was merely being oppositional and had no desire to be a productive participant in the class. Although I was growing increasingly frustrated and mildly angry at her now not-so-cute resistance, I was equally determined not to let the other students see me lose my composure:

Me: [in a low voice] I understand that you don’t like it but I need your help in explaining to me why the text was bad so that we don’t got to read other stuff like this in the future.

Keneka: Don’t pick stuff like *this* anymore!

Me: What is it about *this* that that I should consider when picking a song?

At this point, Haneef, a student who rarely comes to class and speaks even less, is unable to tolerate my ignorance any further and exclaims, “She don’t like it because it’s about abortion.” Without missing a beat, Keneka adds, “Basically!” to punctuate Haneef’s declaration of the apparently obvious.

Finally, I had managed to feel as dumb as I must have looked to my students. A sick feeling came over me as I stumbled through the remainder of the class, speaking vaguely about tone and mood while attempting to find meaning in Keneka’s distant expression. Although Keneka and two other female students assured me that we could continue to read and analyze “Retrospect for Life” as long as I didn’t “make them talk,” I felt the most uncomfortable and embarrassed that I ever had as a teacher. Part of my discomfort came from my overestimation of Hip-Hop Lit’s ability to facilitate such personal conversations, as well as my unwitting invocation of male privilege. More important, however, I worried that I had ruined my relationship with Keneka. After class, I read Keneka’s journal entry for the day:

I think if your not ready to have a baby or just don’t want to have get a abortion but nine out of ten people would say its bad you do what you want to. So I would say abortion ok with me. Fuck it only you can make [several words scratched out] up your own mind.

Keneka’s journal entry, which she represented in class simply by saying “yeah,” provides further evidence that her resistance to the classroom activities of the day was not enacted to mask her lack of interest or effort. It seemed that Keneka had reflected a great deal about the topic and, as I would later find out, was putting forth great effort simply by remaining in the classroom.

I arrived at school early the following day hoping to catch Keneka in between classes so that we could talk about what had happened the previous day. I wanted to explain to her that much of what happened was a misunderstanding and I wanted to apologize for any discomfort that I may have caused. I asked Ms. Blount, her first period teacher, if Keneka had come to her class, and she told me that Keneka was absent. Although it was not uncommon for students to miss their first class and still come to Hip-Hop Lit, I was not optimistic. We were scheduled to discuss “Retrospect for Life” for another day and then move to “La Femme Fatal”

by Digable Planets, in which the narrator politicizes and ultimately supports abortion, for 2 more days. Keneka, however, did not return to class for 7 days.

Because of unexpected scheduling issues, we were still reading “La Femme Fatal” when Keneka returned to school. Although Keneka did not express any dissonance with staying in the class, she was noticeably subdued. Even the normally vacant Mr. Colombo noted after the class, “Keneka was awful quiet today.” I repeatedly looked at Keneka as I taught the lesson to see if she was engaged in the activities. I found no answers in her face, as she scribbled in her notebook and stared at her desk. Embarrassed and saddened by the experience, I canceled the remainder of the abortion section of the unit.

As several weeks passed, Keneka and I resumed our normal playful relationship. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to discuss the ordeal with her to express my apologies and understand her perspective. During one of our “make-up days,” when students spent the entire period completing old assignments, I brought Keneka into the adjacent classroom and explained to her that it was not my intention to make her uncomfortable or force her to talk about overly personal information. She responded,

I wasn’t mad at you or nothin’. I just didn’t want to talk. Remember in the summer time when you asked me if I was pregnant because I was getting fat? [I nodded] Well, I had got pregnant and I ain’t wanna tell you. So when we was talking about it in class it just made me think. I had always said that it wouldn’t happen to me, and so I couldn’t see myself like that.

Although our relationship was restored, this incident provided me with what I considered to be my greatest failure as an educator. Unbeknownst to me, I had created a painful situation for one of my students, completely undermining the goals of wounded healing. Further, the fact that another student, Haneef, had to intervene for me to recognize the silent suffering of Keneka forced me consider the other ways that Hip-Hop Lit potentially silenced all members of the community, even those who were typically willing to speak.

The story of Keneka represents the potential underside of Hip-Hop Lit and other sites of culturally relevant pedagogy. By linking the curriculum to the lived realities of students, particularly those from marginalized groups, we position ourselves to hear stories of pain, disappointment, and oppression that are often difficult to hear and even more difficult to tell. Given the commonality of many of these experiences among students and teachers, we must constantly consider how the articulation of

their accompanying narratives can affect members of the storytelling community. Such a consideration demands that we listen not only to what is said in class but also for silences and acts of silencing within the classroom.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have shown how Hip-Hop Lit operated as a space in which members offered and responded to various types of individual and group narratives through the practice of wounded healing. Through this practice, students were able to recognize the commonality of their experiences, challenge various ideologies, and produce new knowledge. In doing this, the members of the class forged a cohesive community replete with multiple roles and relations of power. To be certain, the unique context in which Hip-Hop Lit operated created a particular set of circumstances that stand in sharp relief to the spaces occupied by many K–12 educators. Despite these differences, as well as those that undoubtedly exist even within more traditional schooling contexts, this article points to the need for critically interrogating the ostensible virtues of hip-hop based education and critical and culturally relevant pedagogies more broadly.

To make an effective case for various forms of culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly hip-hop-based education, we must do more than substantiate claims that such approaches “work” vis-à-vis quantitative outcome measures and qualitative assessments of teacher/student motivation and engagement. We must also expand our empirical resources and critical vocabularies to account for the complex relations of power that operate concomitantly within any educational space that draws on the personal and cultural resources of its students. Through close ethnographic investigations, we are better equipped to understand the nuances and contradictions of such spaces—many of which defy the a priori textualist interpretations of many critical pedagogues—and craft appropriately responsive theories and practices.

Even in the absence of an explicit focus on wounded healing, the effective use of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy inevitably creates new relationships between teachers, students, and the classroom context. Despite the well-documented virtues of such a shift, we must resist the urge to romanticize the relocation of previously marginalized cultural artifacts, epistemologies, and rituals into formal academic spaces. Although such processes can yield extraordinary benefit, we must also take into account the problematic aspects of “culture” and the underside of “relevance.” In particular, we must keep track of the ways in which

many of our connections to culturally relevant texts are underwritten by stories of personal pain, forces of structural inequality, and sources of social misery. Although these realities should not necessarily disqualify such texts from entering the classroom, they demand that we move beyond merely hortatory approaches and adopt more critical postures.

Finally, the insights from this article force us to reimagine the classroom as a space in which teachers and students can “risk the self” through individual and collective storytelling. Although scholarship in fields such as composition theory and critical race theory advocate the use of storytelling, there remains a need to develop educational theory and practice that prepares us for the benefits, challenges, and consequences of enabling personal disclosures within the classroom. As this article demonstrates, the failure to take such considerations seriously severely undermines our ability to transform the classroom into a more safe, democratic, productive, and culturally responsive space.

Notes

1. Signifying is a form of speech used by African Americans that involves “speak[ing] with innuendo and double meanings, to play rhetorically upon the meaning and sound of words, to be quick and often witty in one’s response” (Lee, 1995, p. 380).

2. The racial breakdown of HHS is 41.5% African American, 26.8% Asian American, 24.4% White, and 06.9% Latino.

3. Although we decided not to allow the word *nigger* to be used in class, many of the African American students often used the vernacularized term *nigga* to describe themselves and other African American people. I was extremely uncomfortable about this practice, mostly in anticipation of problems that may emerge if White students began to use the term. With the exception of one instance, which seemed to go unnoticed by everyone in the class except for Mr. Colombo and me, none of the White students used the term.

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